British Invasion: James Britton, Composition Studies, and Anti-Disciplinarity

This essay examines James Britton’s role in the development of composition studies as an academic discipline and considers the relevance of his work in the field today. It contends that his influence arose, paradoxically, through his construction of an anti-disciplinary theory of the role of language in teaching and learning. Finally, in response to calls for composition studies to move away from its longstanding focus on instruction, it argues instead for an increased emphasis on pedagogical inquiry.

James Britton was my grandfather, academically speaking. I did my PhD with Arthur Applebee at Stanford University, and Arthur did his with Britton at the University of London. Arthur talked often about the importance of James Britton on his own scholarship. This influence is evident in many of Applebee’s research topics and methods—the spectator role in literature, audience and function in student writing, the nature of writing assignments, student literacy development in the secondary school, and others (Contexts; Writing; Child’s). From Applebee I learned theoretical and methodological frameworks for studying composition, and much of what I learned he had learned in one form or another from Britton (then put to his own uses). Over the years, my approaches to composition have shifted considerably from what I was doing in...
graduate school, much as Applebee’s did. But in each case, we acquired a base from our respective mentors upon which to build a body of work.

In a 2012 *College Composition and Communication* article on revisionist historiography, David Gold asserts the continuing need to recover figures from the field’s past. But he goes further, stating that “rhetoric and composition historiography must not simply recover neglected writers, teachers, locations, and institutions, but must also demonstrate connections between these subjects and larger scholarly conversations” (17). In this article, I examine James Britton’s influence on the field of composition studies and consider the implications of his work for the present day. I argue that, although a scholarly consensus recognizes Britton’s importance in composition studies, there is a paradox inherent in his influence. While Britton pursued scholarship that helped to establish a discipline, he himself was a profoundly anti-disciplinary figure; he studied the role of language in teaching and learning in order to construct a pedagogical framework, but he opposed the idea of developing an academic area. This paradox reveals ongoing tensions in the field between pedagogy and scholarship, and it raises questions about the direction of disciplinarity for composition studies.

**James Britton and the Discipline of Composition Studies**

Many prominent scholars have acknowledged Britton’s significance in the field’s development. He was one of the twenty most-cited authors in *CCC* between 1980 and 1993, key years in the growth of composition studies, and the only non-US figure in the group, though Paolo Freire has since overtaken him (Phillips, Greenberg, and Gibson 463). Joseph Harris’s 2012 study of composition as a “teaching subject” argues that Britton’s main contribution was to portray the field of English not as an academic body of knowledge, but rather as “that space in the curriculum where students are encouraged to use language in more complex and expressive ways . . . through reading, writing, and talking about issues related to their personal experiences” (5). Thomas P. Miller’s 2011 book on the evolution of college English from the Puritans to the present highlights Britton’s leading role in promoting student-centered writing pedagogy. David W. Smit, in his 2004 monograph on “the crisis of purpose in composition studies” (3), states that Britton produced “the most well-known model of learning to write” in the field (47). David Russell’s 2002 history of writing across the curriculum asserts that Britton’s work “gave researchers and reformers in composition a name and a theory to catalyze disparate experiments into a full-fledged educational movement” (276). Britton’s work thus provided a framework for understanding the
role of personal writing in students' language and intellectual development. In a 1990 CCC article, Mary Kay Tirrell proposes the term “scholar/practicioner” to capture “what . . . James Britton typifies for the profession” (166).

This term “scholar/practicioner” embodies the paradox of Britton's influence. The 1960s through 1980s, when his work on composition appeared, represent the key period in the field's transition from a pedagogical subject focused on teaching first-year college students into an academic discipline still centered on teaching but with a much increased emphasis on scholarship, conferences, journals, book series, and doctoral education. Britton's theory highlighting the central role of language use in intellectual growth and his empirical research on students' writing development were part of the new field's conceptual foundation, cited frequently in composition. Although the theory drew heavily upon scholarship in linguistics, literature, philosophy, and psychology, Britton himself identified most closely with classroom teachers rather than with scholars. He opposed the pretension, prescriptivism, and formality of university subject areas; he disliked the esoteric jargon such fields typically demanded; and he believed in the personal basis of learning. For Britton, learning stemmed from the use of expressive, informal language, a category at the center of his theory of the importance of language, both oral and written, in intellectual development. Widely read in a variety of fields, he preferred and drew upon scholarship that a nonspecialist could understand and apply in his or her own work.

Consistent with his anti-disciplinary views, he expressed a dismissive attitude toward classical and other forms of rhetorical study. For instance, Britton wrote the introduction to a hotly contested 1985 book by C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*, which critiques the use of classical rhetorical theory in teaching writing. Britton's opposition was directed in part against the elitist, Oxbridge tradition associated with rhetorical and classical studies in England; he opposed this tradition, the reactionary politics it represented, and the teaching of prescribed forms it emphasized. Along with coauthors Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen, Britton argues against the traditional study of rhetoric in a 1975 book, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11–18)*, citing Richard Whateley's influential nineteenth-century text *Elements of Rhetoric* (1828) as well as I. A. Richards's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936):

They had high ideals, the rhetoricians, and at their best they offer insights about
language which remain valid, but, as I.A. Richards says of Whateley’s *Elements of 1828*, rhetoric aimed at mastery of the fundamental laws of language but what it actually provided was “a very ably arranged and discussed collection of prudential rules about the best sorts of things to say in various argumentative situations.” (4)

Britton’s background surely influenced his anti-elitism, his identification with teachers as opposed to scholars, and his focus on questions of teaching and learning. Born in 1908, he worked for eight years as a secondary schoolteacher, served as a radar operator in Greece during World War II, spent a decade in educational publishing, then completed a master’s degree, with a thesis on student understandings of poetry, before becoming a university professor at the age of forty-six. From 1954 to 1975 he was professor of English education at the University of London, and he remained active in English teaching circles almost until his death in 1996.

His influence in composition has been felt mainly through *The Development of Writing Abilities (11–18)*, a large-scale empirical study of British students’ school writing, and his theoretical formulation of intellectual development entitled *Language and Learning*. In addition, Gordon Pradl assembled a collection of Britton’s essays from 1953 to the early 1980s in a volume entitled *Prospect and Retrospect*. Britton was long at the forefront of progressive movements in education in Great Britain and all over the English-speaking world. He traveled widely, getting to know—and be known by—composition people in the United States, first through participating in the much discussed 1966 Dartmouth conference on English teaching. At Dartmouth, leading British, Australian, and North American scholars and teachers attempted, with a good deal of conflict and disagreement, to define an intellectual core for English teaching. Britton emerged as a leader of those participants favoring student use of informal language for individual development, a view that would prove influential in the early years of composition studies. He argued against the prevailing US vision of English as a formal discipline in which students mastered genres, standard grammar, and critical approaches to literature (Dixon). In later travels, he worked with people in composition through participation in Vermont’s Bread Loaf workshops, National Council of Teachers of English conferences, and National Writing Project institutes.

Throughout his career, Britton articulated a forward-looking, optimistic, student-centered view of education, not as the passing down of received ideas but as an interactive process that assumed students could accomplish a great deal when pursuing subjects of personal interest, communicating with
supportive teachers, and working in an environment rich in varied language experiences. He saw himself as part of a line of progressive educators including philosopher John Dewey, who established the University of Chicago Lab School and authored numerous books on education; A. S. Neill, founder of Summerhill School in England and author of an influential book by that name about the school and the sense of personal autonomy it attempted to foster in children; Swiss educator Johan Pestalozzi, who wrote the acclaimed *Letters on Early Education* (1819); and Jean Jacques Rousseau, who applied his eighteenth-century romantic philosophy to questions of how Emile, the prototypical French boy, should be educated. These authors believed that students learn best when examining subject matter in ways that they find personally interesting and relevant, that stimulate their curiosity, and that provide skills to help students live a life as well as make a living. Britton’s work thus stands in exemplary opposition to what Douglas Barnes, in his landmark book *From Communication to Curriculum*, termed “transmission” models of education, comparable to “the banking concept of education” discussed by Paolo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

In his views on linguistics and psychology as well, Britton opposed the dominant approaches of his time. Linguistics from the late-1950s onward has been dominated by Noam Chomsky’s generative theory, which posits that knowledge of language is innate and which attempts to uncover the underlying grammar of native speakers. Generative linguistics in the 1960s and 1970s focused on the individual as representative of native speakers in an effort to understand the internal processes involved in speech and comprehension. Chomskian linguists were less concerned with the social uses or conventions of language. Britton, drawing upon the little-known work of Michael Halliday, focused on the functions of language, and unlike most linguists, he was interested not only in spoken but also in written language. Influenced also by J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*, he wanted to know how students used writing to achieve particular ends. As linguistics was dominated by Chomsky, developmental psychology in the second half of the twentieth century was greatly influenced by Jean Piaget, who posited a stage theory of children’s intellectual growth that was largely context independent. Britton drew upon then lesser-known studies by Lev Vygotsky to argue for a sociocultural, context-dependent view of learning highlighting the role of language and schooling. And he focused on how individuals use language not only to communicate but also to comprehend experience and make sense of the world.
In composition, Britton’s work was instrumental in countering the current-traditional approach, which defined the teaching of writing as instruction in static modes of discourse and mastery of sentence-level skills as articulated by Albert R. Kitzhaber and others at the Dartmouth Conference. In stressing the use of writing as a tool for learning as well as communicating, Britton drew upon Vygotsky and philosophers Martin Buber, Ernst Cassirer, and Susanne Langer, all of whose work he introduced to composition studies—itself no small achievement. Vygotsky’s theories played an important role in Britton’s constructivist view of mental development, particularly the idea, influenced by Marxist ideology, that learning has a strong social component rather than being largely an internal, individual process, as Piaget tended to believe. Unlike discourse community theorists such as Kenneth Bruffee, however, Britton was not interested in teaching students formal conventions of specific disciplines or helping them use language to gain membership in a professional or academic group. He opposed curricula that assumed, as he famously put it, “[i]f you limp around long enough in somebody else’s language, you may eventually learn to walk in it” (in Pradl 129).

The Discourse Category System
One of Britton’s most important contributions to the field is the discourse category system introduced and discussed most fully in The Development of Writing Abilities (Britton et al.). He and his colleagues developed the system in the mid-1970s at the nationally funded Writing Research Unit, which he headed. Britton and his research team examined over two thousand pieces of school writing by students ages eleven to eighteen and proposed a developmental model that considered (1) the functions or purposes that students’ writing performed and (2) the audiences to whom students addressed their writing. The authors found a wide range of possibilities but only a narrow band of actual uses for student writing, the overwhelming majority of which involved summary or low-level analysis written to the teacher as examiner. Work by major composition figures has made extensive use of the category system. Arthur Applebee and his research team adapted Britton’s categories in large-scale studies that showed that writing in US schools was even more
limited than in British schools (Contexts; Writing). Other notable figures such as Janet Emig, Toby Fulwiler, Joseph Harris, Thomas Newkirk, and many more have considered Britton’s discourse category systems and incorporated aspects of the schemes in their scholarship.

Britton and his colleagues divided the functions of writing into three main categories. The transactional includes formal academic writing and incorporates the abstractive scale elaborated by James Moffett, with an intellectual hierarchy ranging from copying to reporting, recording, summarizing, analyzing, and theorizing. The expressive comprises personal and intimate uses of written language, such as the working out of ideas or feelings in order to make sense of them. The poetic contains the standard literary genres including fiction, drama, and poetry. Britton controversially claimed that expressive writing served as the matrix from which other functions developed. He and his coauthors predicted they would find a preponderance of expressive writing in early schooling followed by more extensive use of both transactional and poetic functions as students matured. They hoped students would continue using expressive writing as they gained expertise in other function areas because, in the authors’ proposed theory, expressive writing was a crucial tool for helping the writer assimilate new material. However, they were disappointed to discover very little expressive writing among the samples of student prose contributed by teachers throughout Great Britain. Yet, far from concluding that this finding invalidated their hypothesis, the authors argued that expressive writing had not been sufficiently encouraged in schools. They urged a greater emphasis on personal writing, as in learning logs or journals, and other pieces that help students come to grips with new ideas and experiences.

Britton and his team also coded each student text for its intended audience, with each text assigned to one audience category. Though several different audiences might be addressed or invoked in a piece of writing, the researchers assigned a dominant or most prevalent audience to each text (as they did in coding for function). The categories included writing to the self, as in a journal entry meant only for the writer, writing to the teacher as a trusted adult, writing to the teacher as examiner, and writing to a wider audience. They hoped to find substantial use of exploratory writing to self and interactive writing to a trusted teacher, less writing for evaluation, and more writing to communicate with nonschool audiences. However, audience findings paralleled those of function: the vast majority of student writing, according to the research team, was addressed to the audience of teacher as examiner, indicating that students
were doing little exploratory writing or writing not addressed to the teacher. Overall, Britton and his colleagues found that most student writing consisted of summary or perfunctory analysis, mainly restating content from the teacher or textbook, written to the teacher as examiner in an assessment situation. There was little expressive writing; a very small amount of transactional writing that required students to theorize, speculate, or otherwise hold subject matter to critical scrutiny; and almost no poetic writing. These findings had major implications for composition theorists, researchers, and curriculum designers, who advocated widening the range of school writing across subject areas and expanding the types of intellectual demand, level of inquiry, and audience being written for, including increased amounts of writing for an audience of student peers or a wider public.

**Contributions to an Emerging Field**

While developed in England, Britton’s work contributed to composition studies in the United States in several key areas of theory and practice. First, Britton was one of the earliest and most theoretically grounded figures to stress the importance of personal, or expressive, writing (also extensively discussed by Kinneavy). The expressive is writing that is relaxed, intimate, close to the writer; that focuses on his or her interests, activities, and feelings; and that follows the contours of thought, the language of everyday talk. The emphasis on expressive writing led many composition specialists to incorporate frequent use of journals and other informal, ungraded writing in order to help students develop their ideas and learn new material. This concept of expressive writing is so basic to composition theory and pedagogy that we do not immediately associate it with Britton or any other single individual, though Elbow’s notion of freewriting, developed in the 1970s around the same time, has similarities. However, James Berlin’s notion of expressionistic rhetoric is distinct from Britton’s expressive: Berlin’s category is more expressly individual, emphasizing “the cultivation of the self” (73) and drawing upon Plato’s philosophical idealism, while Britton’s, influenced by the anthropological theory of Edward Sapir, also has a strong sociocultural dimension, reflecting a community’s identity in its language and art.

A fairly extensive literature on expressive writing exists, including a book on the subject by Jeannette Harris. A number of critics have challenged the notion that expressive writing serves a developmental function as “a kind of matrix from which differentiated forms of mature writing are developed”
(Britton et al. 83), showing, for example, the existence of both transactional and poetic texts in the work of even the very youngest beginning writers (e.g., Dyson; Newkirk). Yet the expressive category, and personal writing in general as Britton conceived it, not only has an important place in composition history and theory, but it also remains an element in current pedagogies. Furthermore, Britton's emphasis on informal talk (another form of expressive language) as a key factor in writing and learning processes, discussed most specifically in his 1971 essay “Talking to Learn” (in Barnes, Britton, and Torbe) is reflected in the prevalence of small group work, paired discussion, student-teacher conferences, and other forms of collaborative learning and writing in approaches to teaching composition.

Britton’s work has also been influential in writing across the curriculum. He was a leading member of the Bullock Committee in Great Britain, established by the country’s then minister of education and science, the late Margaret Thatcher. The committee issued a widely cited 1975 report, The Bullock Report: A Language for Life, which set forth an ambitious language across the curriculum philosophy endorsed and adopted nationwide as official policy by British elementary and secondary schools. Britton’s view of the centrality of language in learning thus became the basis for new developments in curriculum throughout the country. His close collaborator, Nancy Martin, with several colleagues, published an important book in 1976, Writing and Learning across the Curriculum, 11-16, which made clear its great debt to Britton and which was used nationwide in curriculum development across age levels in Great Britain. The book was later widely distributed in the United States and enthusiastically taken up by prominent writing across the curriculum proponents such as Toby Fulwiler, who incorporated Britton’s notion of language and learning as a key part of the theoretical foundation for WAC. Fulwiler emphasized Britton’s notion of informal, expressive writing, not for evaluation but as an aid to learning, arguing that such writing should be an integral part of students’ written work in all school subject areas.

In addition, Britton’s research on audience has had important implications for composition, particularly in influencing the way we read and respond to student writing. Knoblauch and Brannon’s book devotes an entire chapter, “Responding to Texts: Facilitating Revision in the Writing Workshop,” to an approach which they define as facilitative response. This form of response essentially means reading and commenting on a student draft in a workshop atmosphere, and treating the paper as if the student were trying to communi-
cate with the teacher on an issue of personal significance, instead of treating every piece of student writing as an occasion for evaluation. In the authors’ words, “[t]he writing workshop depends on a style of response which differs altogether from that of traditional instruction because its concern is not merely to elicit writing in order to judge it, but to sustain writing through successive revisions in pursuit of richer insights and concurrently the maturation of competence” (122). This idea of facilitative response in a writers’ workshop has been widely accepted in composition. Knoblauch and Brannon credit Britton’s language and learning theory, in particular his notion of the teacher as trusted adult, in the development of their own ideas about response to writing. Similarly, in Chris M. Anson’s 1989 collection, Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research, many contributors cite Britton as a seminal influence.

Through the example he set in his own work, Britton also helped to legitimate collaborative research and writing in composition studies, perhaps in part because he taught in a college of education, where coauthored work was often more acceptable than in English departments. While establishing his own respected identity as a scholar and a distinguished voice on teaching and learning, he was one of the first in the field to publish collaboratively written work, including several of his most important books and articles. In fact, of the most influential authors on composition through the 1970s, Britton is the only one to produce a significant body of coauthored scholarship. Consistent with his inclination to collaborate with practitioners and his dislike of academic hierarchies, he tried to break down the teacher-researcher chasm by championing classroom teachers, writing with them, and focusing on actual classroom scenes of learning and instruction in his publications. He promoted and carried out teacher- and classroom-based research throughout the English-speaking world. He also regularly highlighted the importance of the teacher. In a 1982 essay looking back on his long career—and speculating on future possibilities—Britton explains his view of the centrality of the classroom teacher in literacy education:

It has become clear that teaching consists of moment by moment interactive behaviour, behaviour that can only spring from inner conviction—I think we are, perhaps for the first time, ready to admit that what the teacher can’t do in the
classroom can’t be achieved by any other means. Not “the grand processional,” then, not the “age of anxiety,” but the “age of the classroom teacher.” (214)

**Britton and Composition Studies: The Paradox**

His many accomplishments aside, what is perhaps most germane today about Britton’s influence in composition is its paradoxical nature. In my view, Britton became an important disciplinary figure in the field of composition studies not in spite of but largely **because** of his anti-disciplinary stance. He advocated a student-centered, 1960s-oriented pedagogy, consistent with his view that students learn best by taking the initiative, pursuing their distinctive interests, asking questions, and making ideas their own, rather than by accepting received tradition. As Joseph Harris points out, there is in Britton’s work an idealized image of the student as a pristine figure struggling against the corrupting influences of an adult world rooted in inequality, elitism, and conformity (19). Britton inveighed against formality and adherence to academic convention in an era when entrenched power was under assault both inside and outside the academy. His pedagogy appealed to writing teachers and scholars precisely when the nascent field of composition studies was beginning to assert itself in college English departments against the more established and not always hospitable field of literary studies.

His theory of language and learning opposed acceptance of the status quo, de-emphasized the role of received wisdom, and diminished the importance of tradition. Thus, the idea of composition becoming a conventional academic discipline alongside other humanities fields held little appeal for Britton. Other important early figures in composition studies expressed similar pedagogical ideas, including Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, and Donald Murray. But such authors have generally been kept at arm’s length by composition scholars. They are characterized rather dismissively by historians including James Berlin as expressionists who advocate intellectually limiting pedagogies emphasizing personal experience writing over critical cultural and political analysis. Their place in the development of the scholarly discipline is therefore highly contested. An influential article published in *Written Communication* in 1997,
“Where Did Composition Studies Come From?” by Martin Nystrand, Stuart Greene, and Jeff Wiemelt, downplays the significance of so-called expressionists while at the same time giving James Britton’s scholarship an important place in the field’s development.

I would suggest, however, that the contribution of figures associated with expressionism has been more substantial than many composition scholars believe. Their books have had a major impact on our field, especially its pedagogical side, including such texts as Elbow’s *Writing without Teachers*, Murray’s *A Writer Teaches Writing*, and Ken Macrorie’s *Uptauft*. These books sold in large numbers when published, remaining popular and in print for decades. Their prose is deeply engaging and captures the progressive spirit of the rebellious 1960s and early 1970s when composition began its transition to composition studies. Such books appealed strongly to many teachers of writing and helped generate interest among graduate students in English looking for an area of specialization. When composition was beginning to assert itself in the academy, academic job prospects in literature were bleak, and much literary scholarship seemed irrelevant to the burning causes of the day, such as the civil rights and anti-war movements; consequently, many people followed Elbow’s example in moving from literature to composition. As an anecdotal example, William Strong of Utah State University, who published extensively on the teaching of writing in the 1980s and is best known for his work on sentence combining, told me that as a graduate student, he was introduced to the field of composition in the 1970s while on an airplane. He had brought a copy of *Writing without Teachers*, recommended by a friend, opened it early in the flight, and become so engrossed that he actually missed his intended stop and had to fly back to his destination. He was hooked, and from that point he focused on composition teaching and learning.

Such books were based less on scholarship than on the politics of anti-authoritarianism, relevance, and personal development. These approaches advocated a break with tradition, which was represented as narrow, stifling, and oppressive. In turn, the new writing pedagogies were bold, individualized, and liberating. This expressionistic work and the interest it generated presented composition as an exciting new field, attracted newcomers to the teaching of writing, contributed to the growth of composition scholarship that would follow, and helped accelerate the move toward disciplinary status. And yet, the discipline as a whole has offered less than a full embrace to such figures as Elbow, Murray, and Macrorie, who were far more committed to pedagogy than
to scholarship. Elbow is a successful academic who, early in his career, wrote a book on Chaucer published by Harvard University Press, authored several works on writing with Oxford University Press, and still publishes articles in composition journals well into his seventies. Yet his advice on writing has over the years also been easily caricatured: for example, directing peer reviewers to respond to a text by stating which vegetable the writing makes them think of (91) or suggesting that reviewers “[l]et your whole body make the movements inspired by the writing” (92). Similarly, many have found fault with his emphasis on personal narrative as opposed to analysis or critique. In such ways, Elbow unapologetically eschews the scholarly stance; as a result, more academic figures such as David Bartholomae, James Berlin, and others have never been entirely comfortable with him as a disciplinary figure.

James Britton espoused a pedagogy in many ways similar to that of Elbow, Macrorie, or Murray in valorizing personal writing and student autonomy, among other features. However, unlike them he developed a substantial scholarly framework for his views, incorporating material from a range of humanities fields in his theory depicting the central role of language in intellectual development. Britton made clear that his ideas were the result of reading and thinking both wide and deep, and he drew as well upon empirical methodologies, particularly in the 1975 study of British student writing (Britton et al.), in examining the nature of student texts, calculating reliabilities and statistical significance. Britton’s writing as a whole foregrounded his scholarly acumen and sophisticated knowledge from a variety of areas. In this way, his work served as a scholarly foundation for expressionistic, student-centered views of composition. Britton’s conceptual framework was carefully developed, elegantly stated, and rigorously applied to questions of language and literacy. As a result, his writing appealed to scholars in the emerging field of composition studies in a way that work by anti-scholars such as Elbow, Macrorie, and Murray—whatever its liberatory aims, pedagogical merits, and lively style—could not. Britton also embodied the progressive political values that composition figures held dear, taking students seriously, as his frequent inclusion of students’ texts in his writing suggests.

Moreover, his work placed writing directly at the center of student learning, as a fundamental engine of intellectual growth rather than as a set of conventions and stylistic choices, another feature of his language and learning theory that held considerable appeal for those in a young, not yet fully respected field. As composition sought increased academic acceptance,
scholars were eager to challenge the limiting view of writing as merely putting on the page what one already knows, of writing instruction as the teaching of static forms passed on via a stifling tradition, and of writing instructors as glorified error correctors. The field as newly conceived would focus not just on helping students enhance their communicative skills, but on developing students’ intellects and on promoting liberation from society’s oppressive forces, and Britton’s work provided important scholarly support for this new focus. I would therefore argue that James Britton is a respected figure in the discipline’s development because he put forward an anti-disciplinary ideology that appealed to composition people eager to escape the straightjacket of elitism and overreliance on convention, while grounding his ideas about learning and teaching in a compelling intellectual framework. His role in composition’s history thus reflects an ambivalence about the rise of academic disciplinarity for composition studies.

Coda: Doubling Down
This ambivalence manifests itself today as a tension between those who focus on the teaching of composition and those who emphasize the development of an academic discipline that moves away from traditional concerns with writing instruction. Many scholars now question the central role of pedagogy in composition studies. Since the publication of Sharon Crowley’s “A Personal Essay on Freshman English” in 1991, an increasing chorus of voices has advocated abandoning pedagogy as a main emphasis, particularly the first-year college writing course that has long defined the field. Critics have noted the exploitative staffing arrangements that often exist. They have questioned the efficacy of providing generalized writing instruction that students must then try to apply in a wide variety of academic and professional contexts. They have expressed a desire for composition scholars to operate like faculty in other disciplines, choosing research topics based on theoretical interest, academic merit, and cultural import, rather than on relevance to matters of instruction. And they have argued that an emphasis on the teaching of writing keeps the field from reaching its full scholarly potential.

For example, Sidney Dobrin, in his 2011 book, *Postcomposition*, asserts that composition must “dissociate from the classroom” (13) and that “writing theory must move beyond composition studies’ neurosis of pedagogy, must escape the shackles of classrooms, students, and management” (28) if it is to become a viable discipline. This goal of disciplinarity free from the pedagogical
imperative is clearly the author’s main aim. The structure of the professoriate itself reflects the growing split between composition as a general teaching subject and as an academic discipline: a tenure-track elite of scholars in many cases teach little or no composition, particularly the first-year course, while a much larger, mainly non-tenure-track group of faculty, both full-time and part-time, have composition teaching as their primary responsibility. The academic field that Britton helped set in motion is now bigger, stronger, and more diverse than ever before, but the emphasis on pedagogy is increasingly under attack.

In the spirit of James Britton, I propose doubling down on pedagogy. Those of us involved in the teaching, administering, and assessing of composition face enormous, ongoing changes in technology that affect the forms of literacy and textuality that students experience. At the same time, student populations have become more diverse than ever before, raising fundamental questions of language, dialect, and culture as they impact the classroom. As well, the structure of higher education is being transformed, with the move toward pre-professional, career-oriented learning and away from liberal arts curricula. And the classroom itself is undergoing a process of reinvention as it shifts to online and hybrid instruction. For scholars and teachers to make sense of these changes and to develop approaches that will help students address the writing challenges that await them, the field needs not only well-supported instructional programs but a resurgence of theoretically grounded inquiry into the teaching and learning of written discourse, inquiry drawing upon a range of disciplines.

James Britton was an education professor who focused unabashedly on questions of pedagogy. Based chiefly in English departments, composition studies has throughout its history had a complicated relationship with pedagogy. As Patricia Lambert Stock points out, English education figures such as Britton and many others have exerted a strong influence on composition studies in part because the study of teaching and learning, while valued in schools of education, has never been entirely respectable in the larger field of English. Composition studies has nonetheless built a solid foothold in many English departments, but anti-pedagogy views persist and have been adopted by a number of schol-
ars who wish to establish a discipline untethered to questions of instruction. James Britton found the establishment of the disciplines problematic for students' intellectual development, but he was also a distinguished scholar who took as his subject the role that language plays in teaching and learning, and he devoted his career to advancing instruction through scholarship. As Britton so aptly put it in a 1982 essay on the future of pedagogy, "What linguists, psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers can explain or suggest about the nature of human behaviour ought in some way to be available to us as an aid to our intuitive practice of the art of teaching" (in Pradl 149).

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